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Spying at the U.N.: Memoir Kaises an Old Specter

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UNITED NATIONS, N.Y., Feb. 17 — A memoir by a Soviet defector has rekindled a debate in the corridors of the United Nations Secretariat over the extent to which an independent civil service is possible within a world body of sovereign states.

When the United Nations was founded nearly 40 years ago, the Secretariat, the organization's administrative arm, was created as a group of civil servants whose first loyalty was to the world body itself. Under the United Nations Charter, every employee swears an oath promising not to "seek or accept instructions from any government or other authority external to the organization."

The defector, Arkady N. Shevchenko, who was the senior Soviet official at the United Nations from 1973 until his defection in 1978, has asserted that the Soviet Union has used the United Nations Secretariat, the organization's administrative body, for espionage.

"Every Soviet national who takes the organization's oath must commit perjury," Mr. Shevchenko wrote in his memoir. "Before an individual's candidature is submitted by the Soviet Union to the Secretariat's Office of Personnel Services, that individual undertakes an obligation to do his or her best in the interests of the Soviet Union and to use his or her prospective job to achieve this purpose."

Few Surprises

Some Secretariat officials and diplomats who knew Mr. Shevchenko when he was at the United Nations say they have found few surprises about the world body in his book. They say it has long been an open secret that staff members from Soviet bloc countries owe their primary allegiance to their governments. But these officials say they fear that the considerable publicity surrounding Mr. Shevchenko's book may harm the reputation of the international civil service.

But other Secretariat officials and diplomats argue that the concept of an international civil service has lost much of its meaning over the years.

Mr. Shevchenko, who was an Under Secretary General, described how he often attended the daily morning briefings at the Soviet Mission and received explicit instructions on how to carry out his job.

Among his duties, he wrote, were using his influence to find jobs for intelligence agents, collecting political and technical information and trying to inject pro-Soviet propaganda into Secretariat reports. The K.G.B., the Soviet

intelligence and internal-security agency, hinted at blackmail if he did not cooperate, he says.

Mr. Shevchenko also asserted that at least half of the Soviet citizens working in the Secretariat were not diplomats, but intelligence agents.

"I don't think anybody at the Soviet mission would care to comment on the book," said one diplomat at the Soviet mission to the United Nations. "There's no comment on our side."

According to one high-ranking Secretariat official, Mr. Shevchenko's account represents only part of the story.

Different Political Ideas

"This organization, for better or worse, contains 159 nations in different stages of political development, with different political ideas," said Brian E. Urquhart, a Briton who is an Under Secretary General for Special Political Affairs and who has been at the United Nations for 39 years, longer than any other employee. "The Shevchenko book shouldn't blind people to the fact that the idea of the international civil service is a good one and works to a surprisingly large extent."

"You wouldn't throw out the precepts of the Bible just because not everyone is living up to them," Mr. Urquhart said.

Those who say that the concept of an independent international civil service is not viable point to the practice by which all Soviet bloc nationals employed by the United Nations are temporarily "lent" to the world body and

continue to serve as governmental employees. This practice, known in diplomatic parlance as "secondment," is strongly opposed by many officials, including members of the United States Mission.

"We regard this practice as a clear violation of the concept of an international civil service," said Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, the outgoing chief United States delegate to the United Nations. "It should never have been accepted."

Although some United States civil servants are on loan, Dr. Kirkpatrick and other diplomats and Secretariat officials object to what they call the Soviet policy of using the procedure of filling United Nations positions exclusively with government employees.

Charges of Abuse

Those who believe the practice is being abused say that most other countries besides the Soviet Union use it as a way to let a small number of civil servants take a leave of absence from government in order to work for the United Nations for a designated length of time.

Civil servants from more than 70 nations are now on loan from their governments, according to a 1984 United Nations document.

A much less important abuse, but an abuse nevertheless, say some United Nations officials, is the practice of government subsidies for the paychecks of employees who have been lent to the United Nations. The practice violates a United Nations staff rule that prohibits international civil servants from ac-

cepting any outside pay.

At least three Western Governments subsidize the United Nations salaries of employees they have lent to the United Nations, saying the practice is needed so the employees will not lose money by taking a United Nations job and living in New York, where the cost of living is high.

West Germany and Japan, for example, subsidize their employees directly, according to Armando Duque, an official in the United Nations Department of Administration and Management. And the United States Government makes up any financial loss when its employees return to government service from the United Nations, according to the State Department.

Although there is no evidence that government-subsidized employees continue to serve their governments, many Secretariat officials believe the practice has set a bad precedent.

Aiding National Interests

Some officials and diplomats say that many member nations try to use employees in the Secretariat to advance national interests to varying degrees.

"Many of the staff from the developing countries have a stronger degree of nationalism than many of us, and it's easier for them to identify with their own countries," said one Secretariat official from Asia. "It's quite understandable."

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The degree of cooperation with home countries might range from occasionally informing a mission of United Nations decisions and meetings to outright intelligence-gathering.

Some United Nations officials assert that the United States conducts intelligence activities at the United Nations. Members of the United States Mission deny the charge. "To the very best of my knowledge, the United States does not have spies in the Secretariat," Dr. Kirkpatrick said.

The international civil service is also hampered by practical difficulties in hiring and promotion. In principle, qualified nationals of all member nations may apply for the 2,000 professional Secretariat jobs in New York and the 2,300 professional Secretariat jobs overseas.

According to the United Nations Charter, the staff is recruited not only on the basis of competence and integrity but also with attention to wide geographical representation.

"You try to get as many posts as possible for your own nationals," said one Western Ambassador. "This is wrong; but everybody does it. And it is perfectly natural for these employees to report to you about what's going on at the United Nations."